

Edit to Hook & Hastings opus 1097, Grace Baptist Church

Previous commentary regarding the organs and the history of Grace Baptist Church and The Baptist Temple in Philadelphia requires the following update. My interest here stems from my research into the life of blind Philadelphia organist, David D Wood (1838-1910) who was associated with this congregation from 1885 to 1909. The following article pertains to the congregation's original building and its original organ.

Russell Conwell (1843-1925) assumed the pastorate of Grace Baptist Church on Thanksgiving 1882. Rev. Conwell was a pivotal figure in Philadelphia history who, as a fact of some consequence, loved music and played the organ himself. When Dr. Conwell arrived from Boston, Grace Baptist (at BERKS and MERVINE Streets in Philadelphia) was struggling. The congregation had been founded in 1872 and worshiped under a tent. In 1874 they began construction of a church, but tight finances and debt threatened the congregation with foreclosure.

They thrived under Conwell's teaching and pulpit. The church building was finished in 1882 and included the installation of Hook & Hastings opus 1097, an organ of two manuals, thirty note pedal board and 25 registers. Temple University had its beginnings here in 1884 and was officially chartered by Grace Baptist Church in 1888 under Conwell's leadership. David D Wood, the fabled blind organist of St Stephen's Episcopal Church had been appointed by Conwell to head the music program of Grace in May 1885. In 1891, when the congregation moved their enterprise to The Baptist Temple at Broad and Berks streets, the Hook and Hastings organ remained in the original building and continued to be used. In 1933 the structure became the home of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. The building was razed in 1968 when that congregation moved to Germantown.

The congregation quickly outgrew their original home. With the charismatic Conwell in the pulpit, the personality driven congregation moved indomitably to build a new and optimistically enormous church at Broad and Berks Streets, "The Baptist Temple." It opened March 2, 1891 as the megachurch of Victorian Philadelphia. With a seating capacity of 4,600, it was in fact the largest church auditorium in America. The Baptist Temple would go on to worship with two magnificent organs, the first, traditional and its successor, "modern", a separate story for the OHS database.

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